

## ***FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** February 15, 2018

**Agenda Item:** Horse Creek Complex Conservation Easements (Springhill Ranch)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 Min

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**Background:** FWP proposes to purchase two separate overlapping perpetual Conservation Easements (CE) involving a total of approximately 15,389 acres in Dawson and Wibaux Counties, Montana. The reason for two overlapping CE is to take advantage of available funding sources. The first CE, is the Horse Creek Complex 1 (ALE) Conservation Easement (hereafter “ALE CE”), which is funded primarily with Natural Resources & Conservation Service (NRCS) Agricultural Lands Easement (ALE) funding, encompassing approximately 10,550 acres. The second, The Horse Creek Complex 2 (FWP) Conservation Easement (hereafter “FWP CE”), is funded with Habitat Montana dollars, involving the remaining acres. The FWP CE also encumbers the entire property to ensure that the land remains as a single unit in the future. Based upon values determined by an independent appraiser, the purchase of the two easements would not exceed \$6,150,000, pending a final appraisal review. The property transitions from rolling hardwood draws and grasslands on the north, to badlands, and finally to extensive Wyoming big sagebrush grasslands on the south. The ranch provides excellent year-round habitat for mule deer and is within sage-grouse general habitat. The ranch also supports antelope, sharp-tailed grouse, whitetail deer, occasional elk, and a diversity of nongame and sagebrush obligate species. A CE would protect healthy blocks of riparian and sagebrush habitats from conversion to other cover types, benefitting wildlife and agriculture, while also increasing public hunting and recreational opportunities.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** FWP conducted public scoping for the proposal July-September 2017 to identify potential issues related to the CE proposal. Four comments were received and were addressed in the subsequent Environmental Assessment (EA). The EA was released for a 31-day comment period ending January 18, 2018. Legal Notice of the EA and comment period was placed twice in three newspapers and also on the FWP website. As standard practice, direct mailings and/or email notification were provided to adjacent landowners, County Commissioners, and others. A public hearing was held at the Wibaux County Courthouse on January 4, 2018. Fourteen members of the public attended with two comments generated. A total of 42 comments were received during the public comment period and were addressed in the Horse Creek Complex Decision Notice (DN). Twenty-seven individuals voiced support. Fourteen comments were opposed, of which 12 were anonymous. One comment did not take a position. The DN, signed January 25, 2018, supported moving forward with the proposal.

**Alternatives and Analysis:** Proposed Action: Purchase the Horse Creek Complex CE to conserve a diversity of important Eastern Montana habitats and provide perpetual public recreational access while keeping the land in private ownership. No Action alternative: FWP would forgo the opportunity to conserve and enhance valuable wildlife habitats with a willing private land partner. There would be no guarantee of public access to the property.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** FWP recommends proceeding with the Horse Creek Complex CE as proposed. The proposal supports FWP’s mission and would implement conservation strategies identified in the 2015 Wildlife Action Plan.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the Fish & Wildlife Commission approve the Horse Creek Complex Conservation Easement in Wibaux and Dawson Counties, as presented.